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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35j4054r>

Journal

Journal of Government Information, 30(5-6)

ISSN

1352-0237

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Publication Date

2004

Peer reviewed

The Arrest and Vindication of John H. Hickcox

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Abstract

In January 1882, John H. Hickcox, a central government documents figure in his time, and the creator of *United States Government Publications: A Monthly Catalogue* or *Hickcox's Monthly Catalogue* was arrested in Washington, DC, for taking letters addressed to the Librarian of Congress. Although the charges were eventually dismissed, 1882 is the last year that Hickcox worked for the Library of Congress. In an effort to add to the history of the key players in government documents publishing, this paper explores this strange incident and also documents other details of Hickcox's life and his catalog, which were discovered during the course of this investigation.

1. Background

In government information circles, John H. Hickcox is best known for the *United States Government Publications: A Monthly Catalogue*, also known as *Hickcox's Monthly Catalogue*, an important early catalog of government documents that was published between 1885 and 1894 and which predates the *Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications*. Hickcox was one of the pioneers who indexed 19th century government publications. This article is a continuation of the authors' 1995 work that appeared in this journal, which established Hickcox as a prominent government documents authority in his time

and described his catalog. These two articles incrementally add to the known history of government printing and access. The authors believe that Hickcox's catalog was influential in the development of the *Monthly Catalog* which followed. His catalog was seemingly the basis for the later catalog, and Hickcox himself was hired as the chief cataloger of the *Monthly Catalog* in 1895 (Stimson & Nobunaga, 1995).

2. The arrest

Over the last few years, increasing numbers of full-text journals, newspapers, and magazines from the 19th century have become available online. In 2002, the authors located an entry titled, "Hickcox, John H., Case of," in a subscription-based online source, "19th Century Masterfile."

The corresponding article from the January 20, 1882, issue of the *New York Tribune* (a news item dated January 19, 1882) reported the following front-page news:

To-day W.T. Henderson, Special Agent of the Post Office Department, arrested John H. Hickcox, an assistant in the Library of Congress, on the charge of purloining money from letters addressed to persons in the Capitol. Hickcox was taken before United States Commissioner Mills, and waiving an examination gave bail in \$2,000 for his appearance at the Criminal Court. A decoy letter was the cause of his arrest (New York Tribune, 1882).

Notice of the arrest was corroborated in other newspapers and in public records. In the *New York Tribune*, and several other newspapers, the arrest was reported on the front page of the paper. News of the arrest even made its way to the West Coast, as was reported on the front page of the *Los Angeles Daily Times* the next morning (Albany Morning Express, 1882; Evening Star, 1882; Los Angeles Daily Times, 1882; National Republican, 1882; New York Tribune, 1882).

Public records indicated that Hickcox was arrested on January 19, 1882. These records described the alleged offense as "purloining and rifling letters addressed to the Librarian of Congress, Washington, DC" (Ainsworth Rand Spofford was the Librarian of Congress at that time). This is a notably different charge than the one that the *New York Tribune* described as "purloining money from letters addressed to persons in the Capitol." The arrest records stated that Hickcox was to "appear before the March term of the U.S. Court." The case files

of investigations of the Office of the Postal Inspector were incomplete for the years 1877–1882 (South, 2003).

3. The grand jury decision

A volume of criminal minutes from the Records of District Courts of the United States stated that on June 17, 1882, “The Grand Jury ignore[d] the two charges against John H. Hickcox for violating Section 3892 *Revised Statutes of the United States*.” No information was found that indicated that Hickcox was either indicted or tried (South, 2003). Section 3892 of the *Revised Statutes of the United States* (1874) reads:

Any person who shall take any letter, postal card, or packet, although it does not contain any article of value or evidence thereof, out of a post-office or branch post-office, or from a letter or mail carrier, or which has been in any post-office or branch post-office or in the custody of any letter or mail carrier, before it has been delivered to the person to whom it was directed, with a design to obstruct the correspondence, or to pry into the business or secrets of another, or shall secrete, embezzle or destroy the same, shall, for every such offense, be punishable by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars, or by imprisonment at hard labor for not more than one year, or by both (*Revised Statutes of the United States*, 1874).

A search of Department of Justice records did not reveal any further information related to Hickcox (Romanski, 2003).

4. Innocent until proven guilty

Newspaper reports from January to June 1882 indicated that many of Hickcox’s colleagues and friends believed that he was innocent. For instance, the January 20, 1882, morning edition of the *National Republican* reported:

Librarian Spofford was not at the Library when the arrest was made. He afterward said that he had perfect confidence in Mr. Hickcox’s integrity. None of the employees of the Library believe that there is anything wrong with Mr. Hickcox. A large number of letters containing money have recently been missed, and Mr.

Hickcox, along with Mr. Spofford, John Savary, Mr. Morris, and others, has been trying to find out who the guilty party is (National Republican, 1882).

Five months later, on June 18, 1882, the *Sunday Herald* declared that:

The many friends of Mr. John H. Hickcox, Sr., Mr. Spofford's assistant in the Library of Congress, will rejoice at his vindication from the baseless and mistaken charges made against him, some time since (opening letters without authority) by the action of the grand jury yesterday in dismissing the case (Sunday Herald, 1882).

In Hickcox's hometown newspaper, *The Albany Evening Journal*, Edmund J. Moffatt also voiced the opinion that Hickcox was innocent:

You will do simple justice to an old Albanian by emphatically denying that Mr. John H. Hickcox of the Congressional Library, whose arrest has been announced in the Associated Press, is guilty of the charges brought against him. A cruel mistake has been committed which will be rectified (Albany Evening Journal, 1882).

The outrage and public support expressed in the before-mentioned print sources reveal that Hickcox was a well-respected figure in his time.

5. Moving on

Most biographical dictionaries list 1882 as the final year that Hickcox served as Assistant Librarian at the Library of Congress (Herringshaw, 1914; Johnson & Brown, 1904; Lossing, 1900; Wilson & Fiske, 1902). A news item in the February 1897 issue of *Library Journal* reported that he "resigned" (Library Journal, 1897). It is surprising that a few obituaries do not even mention his work at the Library of Congress, although he worked there as Assistant Librarian for about 8 years, from 1874 to 1882¹ (Publishers Weekly, 1897; Washington Post, 1897). Hickcox resumed operating a second-hand book business, J.H. Hickcox & Company, beginning in 1882 (Johnson & Brown, 1904). According to the *American Bookseller*, the occupation of second-hand bookseller was no easy task:

The merchant in old books, to be largely successful, must be peculiarly equipped. He must know the insides of books as well as the outsides. He must be learned in the history of books and of rare

editions, and be not only a man of scholarly tastes, but learned in the technique of letterpress, binding, illustrations, etc. He must be a cultured antiquary as well as a good man of business. The man who deals in standard and new books does not need to be more than an enterprising shop-keeper. He who would succeed, on the other hand, in selling old books, needs to have the knowledge, taste, and ability of the specialist (*American Bookseller*, 1883).

Thus, Hickcox continued his lifelong dedication to making print materials available, albeit in a different vein, to the public.

6. The inimitable Hickcox

During the course of this investigation, additional details about Hickcox and his catalog were found. Although this information does not directly pertain to the news of Hickcox's arrest, it is helpful in filling out the historical record of Hickcox as a person, as well as details related to his catalog. An obituary in *Publishers Weekly* revealed numerous particulars. About the period from 1895 to 1896, when Hickcox worked as chief cataloger for the *Monthly Catalog*, the obituary stated, "When F.A. Crandall assumed the duties of Superintendent of Documents he very wisely included Mr. Hickcox in his staff. But unfortunately Mr. Hickcox had been independent so long that he could not easily subordinate himself to the direction of others and shortly after his appointment he resigned the position." The obituary also noted that Hickcox had a son, John H. Hickcox, Jr., who died a month before his father and that the elder Hickcox "never recovered from the shock." After the elder Hickcox's death, his widow permitted his "old friend," G.A. Whitaker, to continue his business at his residence at 906 M Street in Washington, DC. Strangely, the *Publishers Weekly* obituary does not mention Hickcox's Library of Congress work at all² (*Publishers Weekly*, 1897).

Seven letters from Hickcox to Richard R. Bowker, prominent editor and publisher, located in the R.R. Bowker Papers in the Manuscripts and Archives Section of the New York Public Library, provided another rich source of information. Hickcox wrote to Bowker in 1891 about one of his publications: "I want to thank you for your cordial and very flattering remarks about the compiler. . . . One official here is aggrieved. Mr. Ames of the Interior Department thinks he should have had recognition in your prefatory remarks on account of his general efforts in the direction of government publications—the betterment of the system, etc., etc."³ In another letter written to Bowker in 1891, Hickcox asked Bowker how he might borrow US\$500 so that he could continue publishing his

catalog; he offered 20 sets of the catalog as collateral.⁴ Hickcox apparently had high standards and, in January 1897, he shared his concerns about the current state of the Library of Congress with Bowker:

With this mail I send also the Congressional Records containing the House debate on the Library of Congress matters. A most lamentable showing. The bill is now with the Senate, with an outlook discouraging enough. This man will have no restraints, and no dexpertsT if he can help himself. The higher grade officers provided for in the bill as it now stands are simply the old sows he has had for years—no use whatever for modern methods.⁵

When Hickcox wrote, “this man,” he may have been referring to Ainsworth Rand Spofford. It is likely that the bill Hickcox mentioned was the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1898, which was discussed by Congress in December 1896. Among other matters, Congress debated Library of Congress staffing and salaries issues. One of these issues was whether the Librarian of Congress or the Joint Committee on the Library would have the power to make the rules for the use of the Library of Congress and which entity would be empowered to appoint and remove library staff (Congressional Record—House, 1896). The final bill, passed on February 19, 1897, stated that the Librarian of Congress would make the rules and regulations for the government of the Library of Congress and select his own staff (29 Stat. 544 (1897)). Knowing his history with the Library of Congress, it is not surprising that Hickcox kept well informed about the activities in the Library. In addition to being a second-hand bookseller, Hickcox ran a mail order service to provide government publications upon request.⁶ Building on that, in September 1896, 4 months before his death, Hickcox sent Bowker a draft of a pamphlet titled “Bureau of Investigation,” which outlined a government information search and retrieval service that Hickcox was apparently planning. The description read:

This office will aid those in need of information or assistance in any matter pertaining to the legislative, executive or judicial authorities of the Government. Persons who are in want of official, political, historical, scientific or literary information from the Capitol of the country are invited to use this agency.⁷

J.H. Hickcox was listed as the “manager” of the service. Hickcox proposed to charge US\$1.00 per hour as a searcher’s fee, 12 cents per folio for transcripts, US\$2.00 each for copyrights, etc. He asked Bowker to review the pamphlet and, if he approved, to agree to add his name to the list of “references” on the first

page. Hickcox handwrote “Any suggestions?” on the draft pamphlet for Bowker’s review. An advertisement for this service was included in the January 1897 issue of *Library Journal* and in other subsequent issues.⁸ Hickcox took his work with his own catalog one step further by offering customized services in finding government information. His dedication to locating hard-to-find materials continued throughout his lifetime.

7. Hickcox’s passion

Praise for Hickcox’s catalog, beyond what the authors reported in their earlier paper, abounded in newspapers and magazines of the day. In 1885, *The New York Times* said that the catalog “fills an aching void” (*New York Times*, 1885). Less than a year later, the *Washington Post* reported that “Publishers Weekly has decided to discontinue its department of Government publications in favor of Mr. J. H. Hickcox’s ‘Monthly Catalogue,’ which it commends to booksellers and librarians” (*New York Times*, 1886). *The Nation* also gave a glowing review:

Little by little, private enterprise is doing the proper work of the Government in cataloguing and advertising and selling its own publications. Mr. John H. Hickcox, Washington, D.C., sends us the first number of his United States Publications, a monthly catalogue. . . . The entries are very intelligently made, the cross references are numerous, and the typography tasteful and accurate. Such a periodical cannot fail to be appreciated by Congressmen, and will of course find its way into every library (*The Nation*, 1885).

Another notice in *The Nation* also sang Hickcox’s praises:

For the first time, therefore, in the history of the country its public documents are grouped, classified, and made accessible. This simple statement conveys all that need be said to the intelligent, yet it is discouraging to learn that Mr. Hickcox’s admirable and self-denying labors have not met with adequate support, even from the public libraries. He will go on, however, both continuing and improving his work. The truth is, that he is really the Government’s servant, and should be officially recognized as such. The task he has undertaken properly devolves on the Government, and were a place found for Mr. Hickcox in one of the departments

(say in the Bureau of Education), with an adequate salary, it would be an economy, since his Catalogue furnishes an indispensable basis for the control of our extravagant and wasteful publishing. In time there might grow out of this a proper system of selling the products of the Government Printing Office (The Nation, 1886).

Bowker proclaimed in 1885 that “By far the best list which has yet been attempted is that in the neat periodical issued by Mr. J. H. Hickcox. . . . No library with any pretensions to keeping its readers informed should be without Mr. Hickcox’s ‘United States Government Publications. Monthly Catalogue,’ in its reading-room as well as at the librarian’s desk” (Bowker, 1885).

Hickcox had an English agent for his catalog, William Wesley & Son in London (American Bookseller, 1885). After Hickcox’s death, it was announced that the remaining numbers of his catalog would soon be issued (Washington Post, 1897). Hickcox’s catalog was only published through the 1894 volume, and because in 1897 some issues remained unpublished, it appears that he was running behind.

Hickcox’s catalog was highly praised in its day. However, today his catalog and its value are overshadowed by its successor, the *Monthly Catalog*.

8. Conclusions

Was Hickcox guilty or innocent? Because the Grand Jury “ignored” the charges against him, and the Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth R. Spofford, was reported as stating that he was innocent, the authors also believe that he was. Why did Hickcox leave the Library of Congress in 1882 if the charges against him had been dropped? Did he really resign or was he asked to leave? Clearly, Hickcox had a strong personality. The tone of his letters to Richard R. Bowker, and the *Publishers Weekly* obituary, confirm that. It may be that Hickcox was frustrated with the duration of the arrest and Grand Jury proceedings, or perhaps he had difficulties with his coworkers or the Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth R. Spofford. Currently, available evidence does not provide the answers to these questions. Clearly, Hickcox’s arrest did not harm his long-term reputation since he subsequently held a series of responsible positions, most notably as Chief Cataloger for the *Monthly Catalog*. Perhaps as additional historical materials become digitized, more information about Hickcox’s arrest, trial, and the reasons for his departure from the Library of Congress will become available.

In an effort to clarify the situation surrounding Hickcox's arrest, the authors searched public records, newspapers, and professional magazines of the day and correspondence of known associates (Richard R. Bowker, Ainsworth R. Spofford, William H. Lowdermilk, and Franklin B. Hough). As much as possible, the authors allowed the news and opinions to speak for themselves in their original language.

This article continues the authors' efforts to add to the history of government printing, in particular the contributions of John H. Hickcox, which are generally undervalued today. Hickcox made a significant contribution to the early organization of government information, especially his catalog of government publications, which is still used. He was a top 19th century government publications expert, and as such, details about his life including his mysterious arrest in 1882 and his catalog enrich the historical record.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Aloha South and Fred Romanski, National Archives and Records Administration; John Stinson, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library; Robert C. Hickcox; Laura Cadra, Law Library, University of California, Los Angeles; Amie Lee, Judea d'Arnaud, and Moria Smith, Interlibrary Loan Department, University of California, San Diego; and Robert G. Summers, Jr.

Notes

1. According to the *United States Official Register*, Hickcox worked at the Library of Congress from 1874 or 1875 to 1881 or 1882. He was an Assistant Librarian and earned US\$1,600 per year throughout this time period (Davis, William H., Center for Legislative Archives. Letter to author, August 26, 2002).
2. One of the letters from Hickcox to R.R. Bowker (Richard R. Bowker Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library), dated January 7, 1896, was written on black-edged stationery with a note at the bottom: "The good Lord has taken from me my only son, whose companionship I enjoyed fully, for 38 years." Hickcox's son, John Howard Hickcox, Jr., died on December 30, 1896, of chronic alcoholism, according to cemetery records. John Hickcox, Sr., died almost exactly a month later on January 31, 1897, according to his death certificate.

3. Richard R. Bowker Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library. Letter from Hickcox to Bowker dated July 21, 1891.
4. Richard R. Bowker Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library. Letter from Hickcox to Bowker dated August 15, 1891.
5. Richard R. Bowker Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library. Letter from Hickcox to Bowker written January 7, 1897 but mistakenly dated January 7, 1896.
6. In 1896, for instance, Hickcox's advertisement ran in three issues of *Library Journal*: *Library Journal*, 21 (3) (1896, March): 126; *Library Journal*, 21 (5) (1896, May): 258; and *Library Journal*, 21 (6) (1896, June): 310. The text of the advertisement read: "United States Government Publications, John H. Hickcox, 906 M Street, Washington, D.C., Orders by mail promptly filled."
7. Richard R. Bowker Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library. Brochure accompanied letter from Hickcox to Bowker dated September 15, 1896.
8. *Library Journal*, 22 (1) (1897, January): 70; *Library Journal*, 22 (4) (1897, April): 238; *Library Journal*, 22 (5) (1897, May): 287. The text of the advertisement read: "J.H. Hickcox, 906 M St., Washington, D.C., Offers his services to public and private libraries, students, and others in search of government documents or information in procuring for a moderate fee missing numbers in sets of government publications, of which he makes a specialty, other government documents and information from the several departments, museums, and libraries in Washington."

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(Authors' Copy, 5/29/05)